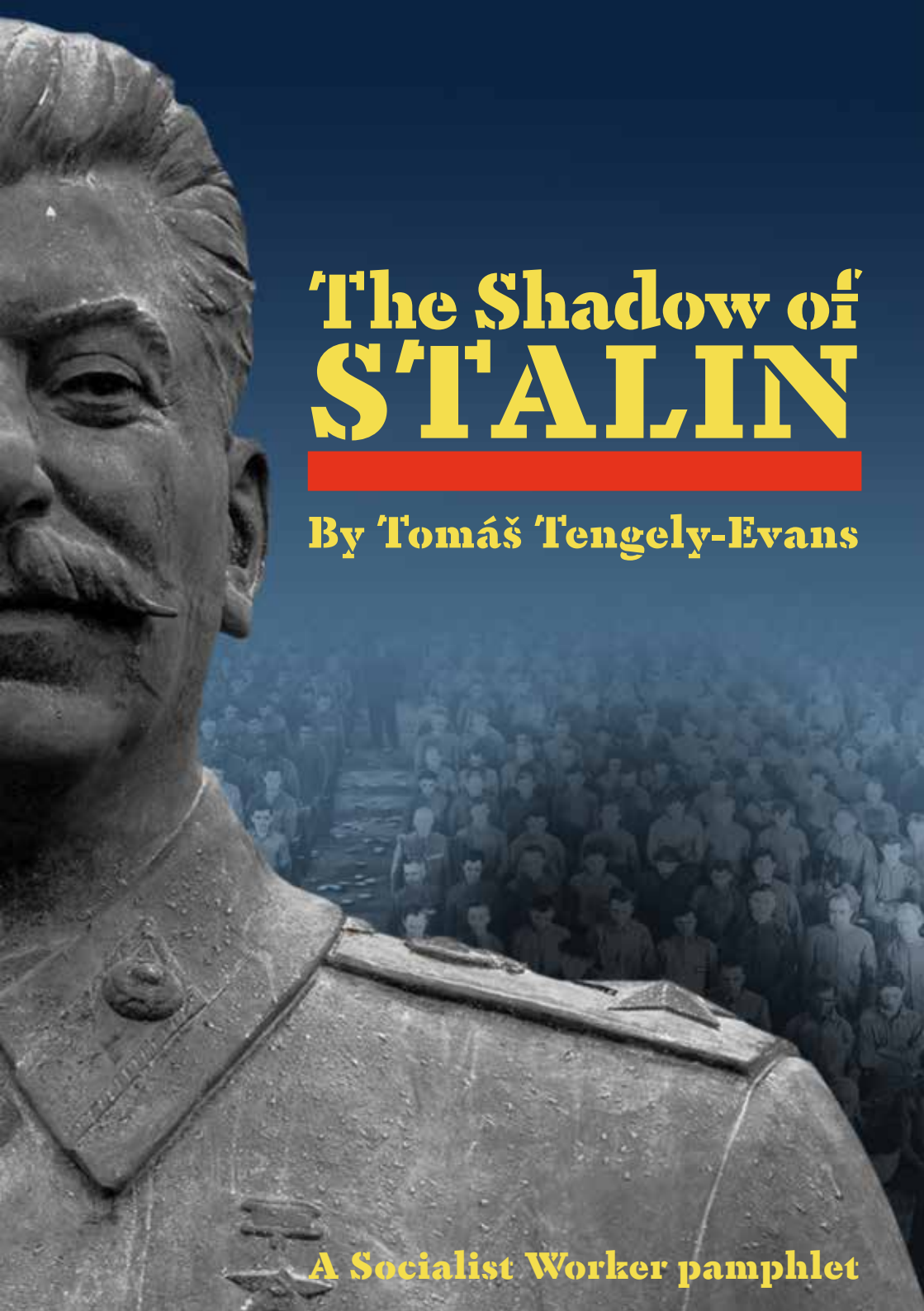

The Shadow of STALIN

By Tomáš Tengely-Evans

A Socialist Worker pamphlet

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Introduction

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Over 30 years ago the red flag was lowered over the Kremlin for the last time as the Soviet Union collapsed on 25 December 1991. But while that Stalinist regime is dead, Stalinism continues to cast a long shadow on the left.

By Stalinism, I don't just mean the years when Joseph Stalin was the Soviet Union's undisputed despot, 1928 to 1953. It describes the Soviet Union's system between 1928 and its collapse in 1991, and the politics of Communist Parties around the world. Although often portrayed as a continuation of the Russian Revolution of 1917, it was a counter-revolutionary break with it.

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) identified the Soviet Union from 1928 as a "bureaucratic state capitalist" society, where workers had no control. After the Second World War, Stalin's tanks forced the same model on Eastern Europe—and other officially "socialist" states such as China and Cuba adopted forms of state capitalism.

Today in Britain Stalinism refers to itself as "Marxism-Leninism" while, in fact, it is born out of a sharp break with Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin. A small layer of young socialists is attracted to Stalinism's seemingly militant rejection of capitalism and imperialism. The Young Communist League (YCL) in Britain has grown in the last few years. Most recently, it had significant blocs on the People's Assembly march on the Tory conference in Manchester in October 2021 and on the Cop26 mobilisation in Glasgow the following month. According to a YCL member, the new intake "have a very anti-revisionist, pro-Stalin, position".[1] Tankie Tik Tok videos and Stalinist meme pages abound online.[2]

Many of them openly hold up Stalin—a murderous dictator who drowned in blood all the gains of Russia's socialist revolution of 1917—as a hero who advanced socialism. So much so, that even the leadership of the Communist Party of Britain (CPB)—founded by hardline supporters of the Soviet Union in 1988—was forced to put out a social media instruction aimed at the YCL. It called on party members to tone down "adulation of Stalin and support for the substantial abuses of state power which occurred under his leadership".[3]

Beyond the ranks of Stalinist organisations, many

on the left have massive illusions in officially "socialist" states, past and present. They argue the Soviet Union and its satellites were, if not a model for socialism, at least more progressive than Western capitalism. This stretches from pointing to public health and education policies to far-fetched claims that those societies were bringing sexual liberation. Kristen Ghodsee's book, *Why women have better sex under socialism—and other arguments for economic independence*, is the best known example of a growing body of work that claims women were better off under what she calls the Eastern Bloc's "state socialism".

Faced with the horrors of US imperialism—the greatest plunderer and threat to peace in the world—sections of the left argue the USSR was a "counter-balance". Here was a power that supported struggles for national liberation and against colonialism in the Global South. In reality, Stalinist foreign policy wasn't based on anti-imperialism—from the Soviet Union supporting the foundation of Israel in 1948 to the French Communist Party's ultimate position on Algeria's freedom struggle in the late 1950s.[4]

Youth clubs in the Soviet Union in August 1951 joined a parade with banners that praised Stalin as though he were a religious icon

What's behind the revival?

There are three main reasons for the resurgence of Stalinism—some specific to Britain, some more general.

First, it takes place against the backdrop of the failures of left reformist projects—particularly, Jeremy Corbyn in Britain in 2019. And a growth of anti-capitalist ideas has taken place in a context where the anti-Stalinist revolutionary left is not large enough to ideologically dominate this revival.

The leap that some young "Corbynistas" have made from the Labour Party to Stalinist politics—whether that's joining the YCL or glorifying Stalinist regimes—isn't as great as it may appear. In *The Two Souls of Socialism*, US revolutionary Marxist Hal Draper argued that both Stalinism and social democracy were forms of "socialism from above":

> *"These two self-styled socialisms are very different, but they have more in common than they think. The social democracy has typically dreamed of "socialising" capitalism from above. Its principle has always been that increased state intervention in society and economy is per se socialistic. It bears a fatal family resemblance to the Stalinist conception of imposing something called socialism from the top down, and of equating statification with socialism."*

The classical Marxist view of socialism from below is about working class people getting rid of the bosses, bankers and landlords and running society themselves. As Draper says, "The heart of 'socialism from below' is that socialism can be realised only through the self-emancipation of activised masses in motion in a struggle to take charge of their own destiny."

A layer of people has gone from one type of socialism from above to another. For some disillusioned with Labour's inability to challenge the system and the left leadership's failure to take on the party right, Stalinism can appear as a more militant variety of socialism from above.

Second, there's a far greater historical distance to the horrors of Stalinism. This means it can seem, much more easily, to have been a socialist alternative to capitalism and imperialism, rather than a repressive regime.

Third, the US has been the only world superpower since the end of the Cold War in 1991. For anyone aged 30 or under, the US wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria and Israel's oppression of Palestine have summed up imperialism.

The SWP stands against US imperialism and is for the right of oppressed peoples to fight back against it—whether it's Vietnam in the 1960s and 70s, Iraq in the 2000s or Palestine today. Whenever there is a clash between rival imperialist powers—for instance, the US and

China—we begin by opposing our own rulers saying, "The main enemy is at home".[5]

However, revulsion at US imperialism can blur into seeing its rivals and enemies, such as China, as "anti-imperialist". Such analyses tend to reduce imperialism to the relationships between Western imperialist powers and states in the Global South, rather than a global system of competing capitalist states and capitals. And, because some of those weaker states are officially "socialist", any criticism is disingenuously cast as "pro-imperialist".

Stalin's river of blood

Many self-described "Marxist-Leninists" act as if Stalin's secret police only hunted down dispossessed aristocrats, former capitalists and imperialist spies who had it coming. The reality is, Stalin unleashed a full-blooded counter-revolution that swept away the remaining gains of October 1917. He murdered thousands of Bolshevik revolutionaries, who tried to keep hopes of a socialist society alive. They were purged, put on the stand in show trials and sentenced to death, tortured or murdered in dank secret police cells and herded to their deaths in freezing labour camps.

Out of 1,588,852 Communist Party members on 1 March 1939, only 1.3 percent had been Bolsheviks during the Russian Revolution of 1917 and 8.3 percent when the Russian Civil War ended in 1920. Only one in 14 Bolshevik party members in 1917, and one six members in 1920, were in the Communist Party in 1939.[6]

Those purged as "fascists" and "traitors" made up about 90 percent of the leadership of the Bolshevik party and soviet state during the Russian Revolution of 1917 and Civil War in 1918-1920.[7] Tony Cliff, whose *State Capitalism in Russia* relied heavily on official Russian sources, explains that "this large scale disappearance of the old guard cannot be explained by natural causes because the great majority of party members in 1917 and 1920 were young".[8] The "sheer magnitude of the 'purges' proved their sham nature". For, wrote Cliff, "if all those liquidated by Stalin had really been 'fascists' and 'traitors', it is a complete mystery how they, compromising as they did at least nine-tenths of the leadership… came to lead a socialist revolution".

The Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky wrote in 1937 that the purges "draw between Bolshevism and Stalinism not simply a bloody line but a whole river of blood". A leader of the Left Opposition to Stalin, he'd been banished from the Soviet Union in 1929 and would be assassinated by a Stalinist agent with an ice pick to the head in Mexico in 1940.

Hundreds of thousands of working class people who fell foul of

A statue of Stalin is brought down and attacked by workers in Budapest, Hungary, in 1956. Shortly after Soviet tanks led an invasion force to crush the uprising

the regime faced its counter-revolutionary terror. Up to 20 million people—including five million political prisoners—passed through the "Gulags"—more than 470 forced labour camps across the Soviet Union. In 1930, some 179,000 people languished in them. By the time of Stalin's death in 1953, that figure had risen to 2,468,524 and had reached its highest point three years previously at 2,561,351.[9] Around two million inmates died during that period.

The total number of people in the Soviet prison industrial complex was actually higher than the Gulag population. It was around 26 million with other forms of imprisonment, such as labour colonies and forced resettlement schemes, taken into account. While mass incarceration eased off after Stalin's death in 1953, 2,500 people were still sentenced to hard labour until 1986.

Stalin's repression of peasants—under the guise of liquidating wealthier ones known as "kulaks"—triggered famines in Ukraine, the Northern Caucuses and Volga and Kazakhstan in 1932-33. As many as seven million people died.

This terror didn't amount to "abuses of state power". It was necessary to facilitate Stalin's plans for rapid industrialisation so the Soviet Union could compete with the West. The Gulags, for example, played an important role in the Soviet economy's new Five Year Plans. Some 126,000 Gulag inmates built the White Sea-Baltic Canal, near Finland

in northern Russia, between 1931 and 1933. Of those labourers, up to 25,000 died according to official figures.

However, it's important not to reduce the Gulag to the role of slave labour. The camps were part of a broader system of state repression. Lenin argued the state is "a product and a manifestation of the irreconcilability of class antagonisms". It is "an organ of class rule, an organ for the oppression of one class by another" and "the creation of 'order', which legalises and perpetuates this oppression".

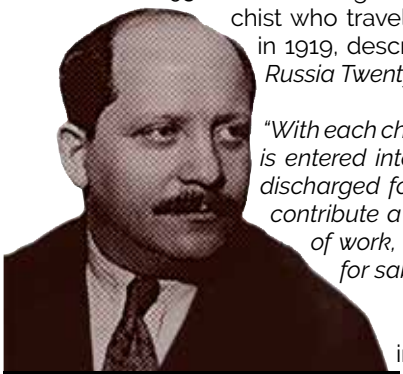
The Stalinist bureaucracy forced through industrialisation. But all of its achievements came on the backs of workers, who had no say over the political and economic decisions that shaped their lives. The class interests of the Stalinist bureaucracy and the interests of workers were different. In *State Capitalism in Russia,* Cliff explained that the "strengthening of the Russian state, its increasing totalitarianism, can only be the result of profound class antagonisms not of the victory of socialism."

Repression also served a function within the bureaucracy as, without the discipline of market competition between firms, "the only means of ensuring efficiency remaining to the bureaucratic state is a terror directed at individual bureaucrats".

The subordination of the working class was at the heart of Stalinist labour laws. One Communist Party central committee resolution from September 1929 made clear managers' orders are "unconditionally binding on his subordinate administrative staff and on all workers".[10] By 1934 Mikhail Kaganovich, a Stalinist bureaucrat in the Commissariat (ministry) of Heavy Industry, argued, "It is necessary above everything to strengthen one man management. It is necessary to proceed from the basic assumption that the director is the supreme chief in the factory. All employees in the factory must be subordinated to him."[11]

A system of internal passports and labour books, introduced after 1930, further strengthened labour discipline. Victor Serge, an anarchist who travelled to Russia and joined the Communists in 1919, described how the passport system worked. In *Russia Twenty Years After*, he wrote:

"With each change of employ, the reason for the change is entered into the passport. I have known of workers discharged for not having come on the day of rest to contribute a 'voluntary' and, naturally gratuitous, day of work, in whose passport is written: 'Discharged for sabotage of production plans.'"



Stalin's defence industry minister Mikhail Kaganovich

Trade unions, a basic organisation of working class defence, were state appendages and weren't even allowed to negotiate over wages. At a managers' conference in

1934, heavy industry minister Sergo Ordzhonikidze told his audience, "Wages are the most powerful weapon in your hands."[12] He could have been speaking at any bosses' conference in any capitalist country. A wages system of piece rates allowed the Soviet state to depress working class living standards by raising production norms.

As the counter-revolutionary terror gathered pace, Stalin launched attacks on women's and LGBT+ rights won after the October Revolution. The regime saw the family as a key institution in sustaining and reproducing the workforce. So, in order to build up traditional family structures, it recriminalised homosexuality in 1934 and once again banned abortion in 1936. The new attitude was summed up by one Judge Stoltz, who said women had no right to decline the "joys of motherhood".

The Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc relied on the family and women's role within it for the reproduction of the working class. Women faced a subordinate position and the same "double burden" of housework and paid work like women in the West.[13]

Russia 1917-1928—from revolution to counter-revolution

A socialist revolution isn't about a small group with berets and guns seizing power on behalf of the working class and declaring itself to be a new workers' state. It is, as Trotsky argued, "The forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny."

The Russian Revolution of 1917 gave a glimpse of the potential of working class people to run society without the bosses, bankers and landlords altogether.

The bedrock was a much more thorough-going democracy than under capitalism, based on workers' councils—known as "soviets", the Russian word for council. Workers controlled key workplaces by the end of 1917. Some workers had taken control of their workplaces, others were given control in the Declaration of the Rights of the Toiling and Exploited in January 1918. Landowners' estates were broken up and handed to peasants.

And as the revolution turned society upside down, it unleashed human potential. There was a flourishing of creativity in art, architecture and literature, the sciences, psychology and education, and many other fields. US socialist journalist John Reed, an eyewitness to 1917, wrote that "all Russia was learning to read, and reading-politics, *economics, history—because the people wanted to know".*

In his account, *Ten Days That Shook The World,* he described how,

"We came down to the front of the Twelfth Army, back of Riga, where gaunt and bootless men sickened in the mud of desperate trenches. When they saw us they started up, with their pinched faces and the flesh showing blue through their torn clothing, demanding eagerly, 'Did you bring anything to read?'."

There were huge strides towards women's and sexual liberation. Decades before the vast majority of capitalist countries such as Britain brought in mild reforms, Russia decriminalised homosexuality and women were guaranteed the right to divorce and abortion on demand.

Such changes weren't just decrees from on high, as ordinary people's ideas changed during the course of the revolution.

Alexandra Kollontai was the first woman in world history to become a government minister in a country where, in some areas, husbands had been permitted to whip their wives.

Trotsky, a Jewish person, had been elected chair of the Petrograd Soviet and recognised as a leading figure in the revolution in what had been a deeply antisemitic society. And in a sharp break with Great Russian Chauvinism pushed under Tsarism, the soviet republic gave the right to self-determination to the oppressed peoples of the Russian Empire.

The reality of October 1917 shows a far richer and more democratic vision of revolution than either the liberals envisage or Stalinists can admit.

The YCL, for instance, published the following account on the revolution's 104th anniversary, "Bolshevik red guards took control of the Winter Palace and crushed the anti-communist white guard opposition. Whereas the February Revolution saw the end of tsarist rule, the October Revolution sought to unite Russia under one ideology—Marxism-Leninism. On this day, the Congress of Soviets was created, laying the framework for a new form of democracy previously unbeknownst to the world."

The bizarre factual errors aside, it makes a moment of working class self-emancipation sound like the most boring, top down affair in history.[14]

Discontent against the Tsarist dictatorship had been accelerating since the beginning of the slaughter of the First World War in 1914. Hundreds of

Stalin is pictured next to saint Matrona Nikonova in the Church of Saint Nicholas. In Stalinist legend she met the 'Little Father' in an Orthodox church in 1941 and predicted his victory over the Nazis. The real Matrona (1885-1952) was forced to live in hiding to avoid arrest by Stalin's regime which targeted religious leaders

thousands of peasant conscripts died in the meat-grinder of the Eastern Front while hunger grew on the home front. The final reckoning with Tsarism would come in February 1917. Women textile workers, striking over bread prices on International Women's Day, provided the spark.

In *The History of the Russian Revolution,* Trotsky described how, "The February revolution was begun from below, overcoming the resistance of its own revolutionary organisations, the initiative being taken of their own accord by the most oppressed and downtrodden part of the proletariat—the women textile workers.

"The overgrown breadlines had provided the last stimulus. About 90,000 workers, men and women, were on strike that day. The fighting mood expressed itself in demonstrations, meetings, encounters with the police."

And the following day "the movement not only fails to diminish, but doubles" with "about one-half of the industrial workers of Petrograd" on strike.

The Tsar was forced to abdicate and a new power, known as the Provisional Government, took charge. Led by liberals and "moderate" socialists, it aimed to turn Russia into a parliamentary democracy and modern capitalist state. But the working class had set up its own democratic organisations during the February Revolution. The soviets were based in working class areas and made up of delegates from workplaces and soldiers' garrisons. The Petrograd Soviet, consisting of around 1,200 delegates from smaller soviets, controlled the capital city after February.

Lenin described this situation as "dual power" with the "existence of two governments":

"One is the main, the real, the actual government

of the bourgeoisie, the 'provisional government'...which holds in its hands all the organs of power. The other is a supplementary and parallel government, a 'controlling' government in the shape of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, which holds no organs of state power, but directly rests on the support of an obvious and indisputable majority of the people, on the armed people and soldiers."

This new situation of "dual power" was highly unstable and couldn't last indefinitely—the question was, which power would win out? The Provisional Government's and workers' aspirations were, initially, in tune with one another. However, Russia's new leaders kept the country in the First World War and didn't want to upset the social order too much. At the same time, workers' demands for "bread and peace" couldn't be satisfied while Russia remained part of the imperialist slaughter.

After February, workers began radicalising, to the point where there was little support for the Provisional Government and the war. Lenin and Trotsky saw the possibility of the soviets as "organs of revolutionary rule". The Bolshevik party began arguing that the working class, in alliance with the peasantry, could seize power and lay the basis for building a new socialist society. They popularised the slogan, "Peace, bread and land," but said it could only be achieved through, "All power to the

Lenin argued consistently that socialism could only come from workers' self-activity, rather than being imposed from above

soviets." The role of the Bolshevik party, which argued for revolutionary politics within the working class and gave leadership at key points, was crucial. However, the insurrection on 7 November wasn't proclaimed by the Lenin and the Bolsheviks, but called by the Petrograd Soviet's military revolutionary committee (Milrevcom).

The body was formed in the final weeks leading up to the insurrection by the Petrograd Soviet, which had a Bolshevik majority by that point. Trotsky, who had joined the Bolshevik party in August 1917, was the Soviet's president. The Milrevcom was made up of Bolsheviks and the Left Socialist Revolutionaries party. One of the Left SRs, Pavel Lazimir, was "even placed at the head of the bureau in order to emphasise the fact that the Committee was a Soviet and not a party institution". If the Bolsheviks hadn't won support for an insurrection among workers, it wouldn't have happened.

Lenin did not lead to Stalin

The horrors of Stalin weren't the logical conclusion of Lenin's politics. The fate of the Russian Revolution flowed from first, the failure of workers' revolution to spread to advanced capitalist countries, second, the decimation of the working class in the Russian Civil War.

Lenin and Trotsky had always argued that, in order to survive in backward Russia, the revolution had to spread to advanced capitalist countries in Europe. Only this could stop it being crushed by capitalist competition and provide it with the resources needed for socialist development. October 1917 did unleash a wave of revolt that ended the First World War and brought down two other European monarchies and empires. But workers' revolution—crucially in Germany, with one of the most powerful labour movements—failed to break through. At the same time 14 imperialist powers, including Britain, invaded Russia to try to "strangle at birth" Bolshevism and fought alongside the Russian Whites who wanted to restore the old Tsarist order.

The Red Army, led by Trotsky, repelled the invaders and destroyed the White armies by 1922, but the civil war had a devastating impact. It decimated the working class that had made the revolution as thousands died on the front lines, hollowing out the soviets and undermining the basis of workers' power. And as production collapsed to below pre-war levels, Russia faced all-out societal collapse. In addition, the alliance between the working class and the peasantry, crucial to the revolution and victory in the Civil War, began to break down.[15]

The Bolshevik party found itself in charge of a sprawling state bureaucracy. In 1921, as the revolutionary wave ebbed in Europe, the

14.

Bolsheviks were forced to bring in the New Economic Policy (NEP) in an attempt to encourage industrial development and reconcile peasants to the regime. It allowed a "free market" and private production while state-owned industries were put on a "profit basis" and "reorganised on commercial lines". That year, Lenin argued that Russia was a "workers' state with bureaucratic distortions" in a country where "it is not the working class but the peasant population that predominates". Lenin and Trotsky wanted the Bolsheviks to hold on in Russia's adverse circumstances with the hope of spreading world revolution. But contrary to Lenin's hopes, the NEP period weakened the position of the working class within society and worsened bureaucratisation of the party.

The Soviet bureaucracy, in its attempts to hold society together in the 1920s, had to mediate between different social classes—namely workers and peasants. This meant keeping hold of the collectivist aims of the socialist revolution and appeasing the individualistic aspirations of the peasantry. While one can't doubt the Bolsheviks' socialist intentions in the 1920s, their own structures came to reflect the often antagonistic class forces it mediated between. The working class, which could have brought socialist pressure to bear, was alas the weakest and most disorganised one.

This process was expressed in different factions within the Bolsheviks—Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition, Stalin and the "centre", Nikolai Bukharin and the "right". The Left Opposition stuck most closely to the Bolshevik's revolutionary socialism. Its programme argued that, in order to move in a socialist direction, the Soviet Union had to increase the weight of the towns over the countryside, industry over agriculture. This required planning and taxes that penalised wealthy peasants. If this didn't happen, the peasantry would grow in strength and subordinate the state bureaucracy to its interests. But, the Left Opposition insisted, industrialisation had to go hand in hand with increased workers' democracy.

These policies would increase the social weight of the working class and maintain Russia as a beacon of socialist revolution. But it wouldn't be enough to attain the material level needed for building socialism. This would still require fighting to spread socialist revolution to the advanced capitalist countries.

However, the Bolsheviks didn't adopt the programme because of two other social forces at play in the party that didn't want to break with the NEP. Bukharin and the "right" reflected a section of the party that had become comfortable working with the wealthy "Kulak" peasants and "NEPmen", businessmen who benefited from the NEP market. The "right" had adjusted their socialist aspirations to the needs of a peasant economy.

Stalin and Bukharin formulated the anti-Marxist idea of "socialism in one country". They made a virtue of the failure of revolution to break

through in the advanced capitalist countries, claiming that under their leadership it was possible to build socialism in one country.

Stalin and the "centre" were based upon the bureaucracy itself—with Stalin as the party's chief bureaucrat, the general secretary. This bureaucracy's main aim was maintaining social order and cohesion and its size and importance grew in the 1920s.

In 1923, the Stalin group took on the Left Opposition within the party. After Lenin's death the following year, it built up the cult of personality and invented "Leninism" and "Trotskyism" as two ideologically opposed positions. Stalin had taken on the Left Opposition with the help of Grigory Zinoviev, who had a leading position in the party and controlled the bureaucracy in Petrograd. Yet he then took on Zinoviev to assert the dominance of the central bureaucracy. In *How the Revolution Was Lost,* Chris Harman explained:

> *"With the fall of Zinoviev, power lay in the hands of Stalin, who with his unrestrained use of bureaucratic methods of control of the Party, his disregard for theory, his hostility to the traditions of the revolution in which his own role had been a minor one, his willingness to resort to any means to dispose of those who had actually led the revolution, above all epitomised the growing self-consciousness of the apparatus.*
>
> *"All these qualities he exhibited to their full extent in the struggle against the new opposition. Meetings were packed, speakers shouted down, prominent oppositionists likely to find themselves assigned to minor positions in remote areas, former Tsarist officers utilised as agents provocateur to discredit oppositional groups. Eventually, in 1928, he began to imitate the Tsars directly and deport revolutionaries to Siberia. In the long run, even this was not to be enough. He was to do what even the Romanovs had been unable to do—systematically murder those who had constituted the revolutionary party of 1917."*

By the end of the decade, the bureaucracy was transforming itself into a new ruling class with its own set of class interests. In 1928, a combination of imperialist pressures, underlying weaknesses of the NEP and a refusal of the peasantry to supply grain pushed the bureaucracy towards industrialisation. Stalin turned on Bukharin and the "right". But this shift to industrialisation didn't represent an adoption of the Left Opposition's aim of the towns dominating the countryside. It represented the domination of the bureaucracy over the whole of Soviet society. The introduction of Stalin's first Five Year Plan in 1928 was a qualitative shift to "bureaucratic state capitalism" because it subordinated consumption needs to capital accumulation.

Russia and the Eastern Bloc were 'state capitalist'

Trotsky and his supporters argued the Soviet Union was a "degenerated workers' state". The bureaucracy had seized political power from the working class, but had retained the basis for a socialist society in state ownership of the means of production. And, therefore, it would only take a political revolution to displace the bureaucracy.

However, the end of the Second World War was a major problem to what's now known as the "orthodox Trotskyist" perspective. After the defeat of Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union occupied Eastern Europe. Its satellites, East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Albania, would all claim to be socialist and workers' states. But, unlike Russia in 1917, they had never seen socialist revolutions where workers took power. And if Stalin's tanks could impose socialism from above, it would throw into question the whole notion of working class self-emancipation at the heart of Marxism.

Confronted with this problem, some Trotskyists chose intellectual somersaults, claiming that Stalin's satellites were workers' states "deformed" from birth. In contrast, Tony Cliff, one of the founder of

the SWP, developed the "theory of bureaucratic state capitalism". He argued that the Soviet Union had become a state capitalist society where the ruling class—the state bureaucracy—behaved in much the same way as a capitalist firm.

Today in Britain, the SWP holds to a state capitalist perspective. Orthodox Trotskyist groups, such as Socialist Appeal and its Marxist Student Federation, continue to argue that the Soviet Union was a degenerated workers' state. Fundamental questions about the nature of revolutionary socialism remain at stake.

To apply Cliff's theory of bureaucratic state capitalism, it's vital to understand how our system works. Under capitalism, there are two main divisions. The first division is between the working class and those who own and control the "means of production"—the factories and machinery, the call centres and IT equipment, the infrastructure, and so on. A minority of capitalists exploit workers to get their hands on profits, but they don't do it just because they're greedy or want to increase their personal wealth.

Under capitalism, workers' ability to work—"labour power"—is turned into a commodity. Workers are forced to sell it in order to make a living, but they only receive a small proportion of the value they create in wages. This gap—what Marxists call "surplus value"—is at the heart of capitalist exploitation of workers and lays the basis of profits. As capitalists invest into more profitable sectors, surplus value flows across the system. The aim of capitalists is to grab as large a chunk of surplus value as possible—and, the more efficient a firm is, the bigger slice they are likely to get their hands on.

This is where the second division—among rival capitalists themselves—kicks in. Competition acts as a coercive force on individual capitals. It forces them to reinvest profits into new technologies and more efficient methods of production, in order to get ahead of their rivals. And this leads, as Marx put it, to a system of "accumulation for accumulation's sake, production for production's sake".

The Soviet Union was clearly marked by the first division between workers and the means of production. Stalinist bureaucrats did not own the means of production, as many private capitalists do in the West, but they did control the state that owned the means of production. They enjoyed privileged lives compared to the working class.

But what about the second division? After all, there was very little to no market competition inside the Stalinist economies.

Marx called the interaction of capitals through competition the operation of the "law of value". This law shapes the organisation of production, the division of labour, the allocation of resources, and so on, within capitalist economies.

Viewed in isolation, the Soviet Union wasn't subject to the law, with the state's Five Year Plans directing investment and the division of labour. But this changes when it's seen in the context of imperialism,

a global system of competing capitalist states. The Soviet Union was locked into military and economic competition with capitalist states. Stalin admitted as much in 1931. In his speech, The Tasks of Business Executives, he said, "We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make up this gap in ten years. Either we do it or we will go under".[16]

This meant that the law of value acted on the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc on a global scale. Harman explained in Zombie Capitalism how this worked:

> *"The organisation of production inside the USSR might involve the putting together of different use values (so much labour, so many physically distinct raw materials, such and such a particular sort of machine) to produce further use values.*
>
> *"But what mattered to the ruling bureaucracy was how these use values measured up to the similar conglomerations of use values produced inside the great corporations of the West. And that meant comparing the amounts of labour used in the USSR to the labour used in the Western corporations. Or, to put it in Marx's terms, production within the USSR was subject to the law of value operating on the global scale."*

Convicts in a Gulag endure freezing conditions in Siberia, Russia

A report in Communist Party newspaper Pravda, quoting then Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, showed the bureaucracy understood the pressures of competitive accumulation:

> *"Comrade Brezhnev dwelt on the questions of the economic competition between the two world systems. "This competition takes different forms," he said. "In many cases we are coping successfully with the task of overtaking and outdistancing the capitalist countries in the production of certain types of output…but the fundamental question is not how much you produce but also at what cost, with what outlays of labour… It is in this field that the centre of gravity between the two systems lies in our time."* [17]

However, the majority of the left still had illusions in the Soviet economy as more progressive than capitalism. Ernst Mandel, an orthodox Trotskyist, claimed in 1956, "The Soviet Union maintains a more or less even rhythm of economic growth, plan after plan, decade after decade, without the progress of the past weighing on the possibilities of the future… All the laws of development of the capitalist economies which provoke slowdown in the speed of economic growth are eliminated."

In reality, the Stalinist bloc felt these "laws of development" all too acutely. While the Soviet economy saw impressive growth rates, it suffered from a serious lack of dynamism compared to Western capitalism. Fundamentally, internal growth could not overcome the international pressure for ever more capital accumulation. And the state capitalist economies continually crashed against the limits of accumulation set by their national economies.

This was compounded by the arms race during the Cold War. Because of the Soviet Union's backward position, it placed a particularly heavy burden on the economy, distorting other investment decisions. And, while the Soviet economy was planned according to Five Year Plans, this didn't ensure a "more or less even rhythm". There were fits and starts between and during each plan, as the bureaucracy suddenly redirected investment or froze industrial projects in order to stave off crises of overaccumulation. The result was a distorted economy, with anarchy and imbalances between different sectors.

(Right) Parading in Red Square. Competition with the West drove the Soviet Union towards ever higher arms spending and into imperialist rivalry. Workers had to be squeezed ever harder to pay for the military

Stalin—gravedigger of world revolution

Stalinist Russia was not a bulwark against imperialism. Its foreign policy was shaped by imperialist competition—often with disastrous consequences for workers and liberation movements across the world. Time and time again, Stalin's policies buried revolutionary potential.

This is true of China in 1925-27, Spain in 1936-38, Greece, Italy and a host of European countries after 1945, Iraq in 1958-59 and France in 1968. While the charge sheet against Stalinism is too long to outline in full all of these examples, Spain is instructive.

From 1935, Soviet foreign policy was driven by wanting to make an alliance with capitalist powers against Nazi Germany. The Moscow-aligned Communist Parties were instructed to join "Popular Fronts" with social democratic and liberal capitalist parties. They were told to clamp down on any working class action that might scare off the most right wing forces within these cross-class coalitions.

US Trotskyist James P Cannon would write in 1954, "This anti-Leninist theory of 'Socialism in One Country' and 'coexistence' with capitalism in all other countries, transformed the Soviet bureaucracy into the most effectively conservative, anti-revolutionary force in the world, and debased the Communist parties in the capitalist countries from agencies of revolution into border guards of the Soviet Union and pressure groups in the service of its foreign policy."

Stalin's Popular Front policy had disastrous consequences in the fight against fascism during the Spanish Civil War. When General Francisco Franco launched an armed rising against the Spanish Republic on 17 July 1936, the Popular Front government seemed paralysed.

For two days, it behaved as if the rising had not happened and had even tried to negotiate with Franco. It refused to send the Spanish fleet to block Franco's attempts to cross from Spanish-ruled Morocco, fearing Britain's wrath if its ships blocked the Strait of Gibraltar.

However, workers and peasants rose up and managed to fend off Franco's rising in large parts of the country. A general ferment of revolt gripped Spanish society. As the Republican state collapsed in many parts of the country, workers and peasants began forming their own organisation to take over the running of everyday life.

The revolutionary process was most advanced in Barcelona. It led British socialist

In 1937, Stalin instructed Communists in Spain to turn their guns on revolutionary militias

George Orwell, who fought against fascism in Spain, to write, "It was the first time I had ever been in a town where the working class was in the saddle."

But Stalin did not want a revolution to take place in Spain. A workers' revolution would have sent shockwaves through ruling classes across the US and Europe, making an alliance between the Soviet Union and Britain and France impossible. He insisted on keeping the inept moderate Manuel Azana as president, arguing it would "prevent the enemies of Spain from considering her a Communist republic". [20]

The Popular Front—with the Communists playing a key role—did its best to hold back the workers' and peasants' resistance. Jesus Hernandez, editor of the Communist Party newspaper, declared, "We are motivated exclusively by a desire to defend the democratic republic."

Where a boss hadn't declared themselves for Franco, they opposed worker action to take over the factory. Where a landowner hadn't declared themselves for Franco, they opposed peasant action to take the fields for themselves.

From 1937, the Communist Party's influence grew inside the Popular Front after Stalin began to give some arms to the Republic. They helped turn those guns on their left wing opponents to put down the Spanish Revolution, notably in the counter-revolutionary coup in Barcelona in 1937.

Contrary to the Stalinists' claims, the defeat of revolution strengthen fascism and helped lead to its victory.

24.

Crisis and class struggle in the Stalinist states

As class societies, the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc were marked by crisis and class struggle just as much as the West. Workers rose up in Czechoslovakia and East Germany in 1953, Poland and Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Poland in 1980-81. In the late 1980s and 1990s, strikes in Russia's and Ukraine's coalfields and in Belarus played an important role in precipitating the collapse of the Soviet Union itself.

When the Eastern Bloc's workers fought back, they faced state repression. And there were full scale Soviet invasions during the Hungarian workers' revolution of 1956 and Czechoslovakia's Prague Spring reform process of 1968. The underlying cause was the ruling bureaucracy squeezing workers in the drive for capital accumulation. Before the Berlin Workers' Uprising of 1953, East Germany's ruling SED party admitted as much. It said new working norms in construction—in reality a 10 percent pay cut—were necessary because "accumulation can only be achieved through continual advance of labour productivity". [18]

By the time of Stalin's death in 1953, the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc's rulers were staring at a crisis. The bureaucracy had successfully built up heavy industry in the 1930s. It had done so by increasing "labour productivity"—squeezing more out of workers—through brutal repression. But relying on terror to increase productivity was hitting its limits. And modern capitalist development requires a healthy and educated workforce to move beyond an initial phase of industrial development.

This crisis caused splits between Stalin's henchmen after his death. Eventually, Nikita Khrushchev managed to grab the top job promising reforms, and launched a full-scale attack on Stalin's "cult of personality" at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party in 1956. Alongside the "stick" of state terror, Khrushchev now promised the "carrot" of higher wages and more consumer goods to increase workers' productivity. But Khrushchev was just as willing to use repression when the bureaucracy's rule was threatened.

These divisions within the bureaucracy opened the door to one of the most impressive workers' uprisings against Stalinism—the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Matyas Rakosi's Stalinist regime had built up heavy industry at the expense of workers' living standards in

(Right) Prague residents block tanks during a confrontation between Soviet troops and protesters near the Czechoslovakian Radio headquarters in the spring of 1968

The Soviet Union wasn't 'anti-imperialist'

Today many socialists, who take an uncompromising stand against Western imperialism, look to the Soviet Union's support for national liberation struggles as a source of inspiration.

In the wake of 1917, Russia was a beacon for anti-colonialism and supported fights for freedom. But the Stalinist regime was no principled supporter of colonial freedom. The Cold War was an inter-imperialist conflict between US and the Soviet Union, where the superpowers' rival blocks competed on the world stage and fought proxy wars.

The USSR's foreign policy was shaped by this superpower competition. For example, in 1947-48, as Zionist paramilitaries ethnically cleansed Palestinians, Stalin backed the creation of the settler colonial state of Israel hoping for an ally in the Middle East.

The Soviet's new satellite regime in Czechoslovakia supplied vital arms to the Haganah, which would become the core of the Israel Defense Forces after 1948.

Israel first prime minister, David Ben Gurion, would later claim, "Czechoslovak arms saved the State of Israel, really and absolutely." [21] And in the summer and autumn of 1948, the Czechoslovakian armed forces trained an Israeli brigade at the Libava camp.

In 1954 the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) rose up against French colonial rule and fought an armed struggle until it won the north African country's independence in 1962.

But the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) would end up leaving it to fight alone.

Infamously in 1956, it disgracefully backed the Labour-type SFIO prime minister Guy Mollet's motion that gave him "special powers" to act in Algeria in "safeguarding the territory". Stalinist hardliner Jacques Duclos justified the PCF's support arguing for "the existence and permanence of political, economic, and cultural bonds between France and Algeria".

The shameful stance of the once proudly anti-colonial party was, in part, a legacy of its Popular Front strategy of the 1930s. By working with bourgeois parties, it framed policies in terms of "French interests" and French nationalism.

Czech-supplied Avia S-199 planes helped Israel colonise Palestine

the years following the Second World War. In 1953, it could boast that industrial production had soared by 210 percent from 1949. But, during the same period, workers' living standards had sunk by 20 percent as they were forced to pay the price of "building socialism"—in reality, capital accumulation.

Khrushchev had forced out Rakosi for his refusal to face up to the crisis. His opportunistic attacks on Stalin's "cult of personality" caused immense ideological confusion among Eastern Europe's rulers, but they also saw ordinary people begin to question society. Hungarian workers began asserting their demands on the factory floor—and then, on 23 October 1956, mass resistance erupted.

Peter Fryer, a journalist on the Daily Worker newspaper, had been dispatched by the Communist Party of Great Britain to report the official line that the workers were "counter-revolutionaries". But, as he made his way through Hungary, Fryer discovered a workers' revolution against the Stalinist regime.

His book, *Hungarian Tragedy,* is a brilliant eyewitness account. Hungarian workers had set up their own democratic organisations in opposition to the state that could have become the new "organs of revolutionary rule". Describing one committee in the town of Gyor, Fryer wrote:

> *"Here was a revolution, to be studied not in the pages of Marx, Engels and Lenin, valuable though these pages may be, but happening here in real life before the eyes of the world. A flesh and blood revolution with all its shortcomings and contradictions and problems—the problems of life itself. As they took me to see the president and vice-president of this committee not yet forty-eight hours old I caught sight of a portrait of Lenin on the wall, and I could almost fancy his shrewd eyes twinkling approvingly."*

There was a situation of "dual power" between the Hungarian government and the workers' councils. This could not go on forever. Hungarian workers had begun to link up into a central soviet in Budapest, Unfortunately, there was no revolutionary organisation in Hungary, unlike the Bolsheviks in Russia, which could have raised the slogan, "All power to the soviets." And with the help of thousands of Russian tanks, the government reasserted its control.

While that revolution was crushed, it shattered the British Communist Party's ideological stranglehold and opened the door for a new anti-Stalinist left.

Under the slogan, "Neither Washington nor Moscow—but international socialism," Socialist Worker supported working class struggles in the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc.

China is not an alternative

Rejecting or critiquing officially "socialist" regimes such as China or Vietnam means someone isn't sufficiently anti-imperialist, according large sections of the left.

One new group, No To Cold War, was set up to oppose the US and Britain ramping up tensions with China in south east Asia. But, rather than seeking unity around opposition to Western imperialism's war drive, it opts for a craven adoration of the Chinese state. Some speakers at its meetings downplay the oppression of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang in the name of Anglo-Chinese "friendship" and "understanding". And when the former Communist Party hack turned China specialist Martin Jaques appeared on left media channel Novara Media, he justified Uyghur repression in terms of a "terrorism" problem.

Standing against Western imperialism, and insisting that socialists' main job is to oppose their own ruling class, shouldn't mean siding with regimes such as China.

The Chinese Revolution of 1949 was a blow to feudalism and imperialism and improved the lives of ordinary people. However, unlike Russia in 1917, it was a nationalist revolution—not a socialist revolution where the working class seizes political power and begins to run society. When the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) People's Liberation Army marched into Beijing, jubilant crowds of workers lined the streets. But they had not played an active part in the revolution and the CCP regime that came to power wasn't socialist or a workers' state in any way. Workers' councils didn't control society, workers' didn't run their factories and peasants didn't control the land. This wasn't inevitable.

The Russian Revolution had inspired Chinese workers and sections of the middle class. A group of socialist activists, including Mao, set up the CCP in the early 1920s and argued the working class was central. While numerically small, it had a social power disproportionate to its size within China and could lead revolutionary change, like Russian workers had in 1917. This seemed a real possibility as a wave of workers' struggle swept through Chinese cities in 1925.

However, the Soviet leadership—increasingly dominated by Stalin—ordered the Chinese Communists to follow a disastrous strategy. The nationalist Kuomintang party, led by warlord Chiang Kai-Shek, thought it could gain from the revolt and aligned itself with the Soviet Union. And so Stalin instructed the CCP to subordinate itself to the nationalists.

But Chiang Kai-Shek's wanted to throw off the shackles of foreign imperialist domination and develop China into a modern capitalist state—not any sort of change that threatened Chinese bosses. In 1927, fearing the potential of workers' revolution, he turned his guns on the CCP and the workers' movement. Thousands of activists were murdered or forced to flee into the countryside. This meant the CCP

was transformed from a party of working class militants and radical middle class intellectuals into a military organisation based on the peasantry. Stalin encouraged this transformation as the CCP fought the Kuomintang throughout the 1930s and 40s.

Meanwhile, Mao's leadership of the CCP looked to the Soviet Union's state capitalism as a model to develop China into a modern state. He hoped to replicate Stalin's rapid industrialisation on the backs of workers and peasants, once the "chief enemies", imperialists and landlords, were out of the way.

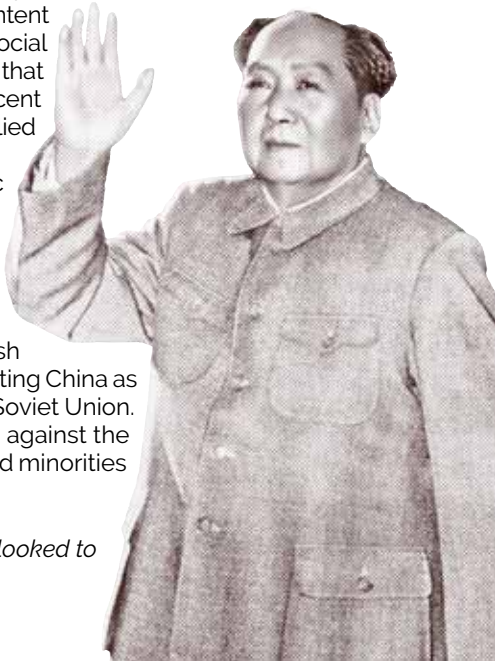
His leadership followed a series of failed attempts to kickstart growth in the 1950s and 60s—with murderous consequences. During the "Great Leap Forward" from 1957, peasants were rounded up into huge communes and forced to work around the clock to meet impossible production targets. The result was a famine with 30 million dead by 1960 and tens of millions others were reduced to desperate measures, including cannibalism and eating grass and bark from trees. [19]

By the late 1970s, the CCP leadership was convinced that development wouldn't come through continual attempts to squeeze more out workers and peasants. Instead, it turned towards opening up the country to foreign investment while maintaining a high degree of state planning and political control.

This strategy has allowed China's rulers to oversee impressive growth rates and assert their own imperialist interests. However, they also face a problem. The neoliberal period has increased inequality, fueled social discontent and created a large working class. It's a social force that could challenge the regime and that has already shown its ability to fight in recent years. In response, China's rulers have relied more on centralisation and nationalism.

This includes clamping down on ethnic minorities, notably the Uyghur Muslims. In contrast, when the CCP was a revolutionary organisation in the 1920s, it supported the right of oppressed peoples to self-determination.

Of course we stand against US and British imperialism, but that shouldn't mean painting China as any more a socialist alternative than the Soviet Union. We should be on the side of the workers against the state capitalist rulers—and with oppressed minorities and their right to self-determination.



(Right) Chairman Mao's Communist Party looked to state capitalist Russia for inspiration

Is Cuba socialist?

It's easy to why Cuba continues to be a cause celebre for the left. I was radicalised by the Palestinians' Second Intifada and the US War on Terror in the early 2000s. It was incredibly inspiring to know that Cuba, a small island less than 80 kilometres off the coast of Florida, had struck it to butchers of Afghanistan and Iraq.

But we have to be honest. Cuba is not a model for socialism—in fact, it's no sort of socialism at all. And saying so, doesn't mean giving one inch to US imperialism.

Just last year, Joe Biden had the gall to say the US "stands firmly with the people of Cuba as they assert their universal rights". We're certainly not going to take lectures from the president of a country that operates a prison, Guantanamo Bay, on Cuba. If Biden gave a damn about ordinary Cubans, he would lift the US blockade of Cuba that caused immense suffering on the island for decades. But US imperialism has no interest in freedom and self-determination in Cuba, Latin America or anywhere else.

The US invaded Cuba in the 1890s and treated it as a colony, making it reliant on a cash crop economy. By the late 1950s, US banks and corporations owned 90 percent of Cuban mines, 80 percent of its public utilities, 50 percent of its railways, 40 percent of its sugar production and 25 percent of its bank deposits.

From the 1940s, the US backed the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. Under his regime, US corporations and gangsters, landowners and a small minority around president did incredibly well. But the vast majority of society—and not just the working class and the poor—was locked out. This saw a series of important strikes that offered a pointer to change driven from below.

Fidel Castro represented a middle class layer, which saw that imperialism was holding back Cuba's development and fought to throw off US domination. In 1956, Castro, Che Guevara and 80 fighters sailed from Mexico to Cuba to overthrow Batista.

When the Cuban Revolution brought down the Batista regime in 1959, it was a huge blow to US imperialism and undoubtedly a step forward for ordinary people. But it wasn't a socialist revolution—it was a nationalist revolution against US imperialism and its client regime.

For Marxists, a socialist revolution is one where working class people take power and, through their own democratic organisations, begin to run society from the bottom up.

That wasn't the strategy of Castro and the 26th July movement. In the Cuban Revolution, there were political battles over how to win. The question was between the "sierra" and the "llano". The "sierra" was Castro's Guerrilla army in the mountains and the "llano" was the broader movement of workers, students and others in Cuba, including in major

Police detaining a demonstrator during a protest in Havana, Cuba, in July 2021

cities. Which would dominate? Which was the motor of change? For Castro and Guevara, the rebel army was the instrument of change, with the social movement playing a supporting part.

There were impressive workers' battles in the late 1950s, in the face of Batista's brutal repression and a trade union bureaucracy that worked with the regime. What began a small group of working class militants, organised unofficial strikes, an underground press and a powerful general strike in 1958.

However, in the end, the primacy of the guerrilla strategy over mass action of workers and students won out. The guerrillas seized power on behalf of the masses, rather than working class people seizing power for themselves. Cuba's new rulers undoubtedly enjoyed support. When the US sent right wing Cuban exiles to overthrow the new regime in the Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961, it was a total disaster with mass support for Castro. But the regime Castro built up is not socialist, it's a "state capitalist" society.

The Cuban Revolution took place during the Cold War, an inter-imperialist conflict between the US and Stalinist Russia. Many national

liberation struggles in the Global South looked to Russian state capitalism as a way of bringing about national development. And, facing US imperialist assaults, Cuba came increasingly into the orbit of Stalinist Russia.

It, too, became a state capitalist society whose priorities are shaped by capital accumulation. Yes, Castro increased state ownership, but more state ownership or control of the economy does not equal socialism.

In recent years, the Cuban state capitalist regime has been clawing back welfare, privatisation parts of the economy, attracting foreign capital and increasing reliance on the tourism sectors. These policies have fed discontent—leading to protests by ordinary people in the summer of 2021.

These protests produced an awful lot of bad takes on the left. Of course, there were all sorts of contradictory politics and the US hoped to use it for their own ends. There were right wingers and reactionaries, who are opposed to the regime, but they are small. And to claim those protesters were just foot soldiers for the CIA or right wing Miami exiles is simply wrong. There's also the Cuban LGBT+ movement, those who've built opposition to racism against black Cubans and dissident left wing currents who've been growing in the last two decades.

Supporting Cuba's right to self-determination should not have to mean lining up behind the state capitalist regime against the working class.

1989—when the wall came tumbling down

"All that is solid melts into air," wrote Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in the Communist Manifesto of 1848. Their description of seemingly indestructible societies falling apart was particularly apt in 1989.

A revolutionary process began that year which destroyed the world order in Europe. The Eastern Bloc countries fell first, and shortly after in 1991 came the Soviet Union that had controlled them since the end of the Second World War. As millions took to the streets, regimes which described themselves as "socialist" stood exposed as brutal dictatorships.

In October, East Germany's rulers were celebrating the 40th anniversary of its founding. The ruling SED was among the most hardline Stalinist parties. It thought its repressive state apparatus would forever protect it. But discontent was brewing. Groups of radicals who had previously huddled isolated in churches now found that first hundreds, then thousands, were ready to answer their call. A similar spirit gripped

People celebrate the fall of the Berlin Wall. From 1961, the Wall had divided the German capital—one half controlled by the Russian-aligned East Germany, the other by US ally West Germany

workers in country after country. The Polish regime had already been forced to accept free elections after years of crisis. Hungary had opened its western border, revealing the first chinks in the Iron Curtain that separated East from West.

Within a month of East Germany's anniversary celebration one million people joined a protest against the regime. Less than a week later, on 9 November, hundreds of people were breaking apart the Berlin Wall the country's rulers had built in 1961 to stop people from fleeing. Scenes of young people from the East and West dancing as they tore down huge chunks of the concrete structure spread like wildfire.

In Czechoslovakia, high school and university students marched through Bratislava on 16 November. The next day students in the capital, Prague, marched in much greater numbers. This time riot police brutally suppressed the protest and in turn triggered the "Velvet Revolution"—so called because it swept out the old regime with little violence.

Three days later half a million filled Prague's Wenceslas Square and thousands protested in towns, campuses and workplaces. The Communist Party leadership and government resigned, and were replaced with a less hardline regime. But for the new government, the writing was already on the wall. Graffiti appeared in the capital reading, "To the general secretary—a general strike". By the end of December,

Communist Party rule was over. In November, Romania's Communist Party rubber-stamped the re-election of Nicolae Ceausescu as party leader for another five years. Ceausescu, probably the most feared dictator in Eastern Europe, used his acceptance speech to denounce the wave of revolt in the Eastern Bloc.

On 21 December, he organised a mass rally in the capital Bucharest. When Ceausescu rose to speak he thought it would be another display of "popular support" as his tanks crushed a rebellion in Timisoara. But within minutes, the crowd turned against him. They began to jeer and boo, and sections burst into chants of "Ti-mi-soa-ra—Ti-mi-soa-ra"—in solidarity.

Ceausescu raised his right hand to silence the crowd—only to find his authority had melted away right in front of him. His stunned expression, captured by the state TV station's cameras, was broadcast live across the country.

The Ceausescus were forced to flee the palace by helicopter. On the following days tens of thousands of people in other towns and cities rose in revolt. And the majority of the army broke with the regime and fought pitched battles against the Securitate secret police. Within four days, the Ceausescus were captured, sentenced to death by a soldiers' court, and shot dead for crimes against the people.

In 1989, Western imperialism claimed to be on the side of people on streets of eastern Europe because it saw an opportunity benefit from the collapse of a rival. But Western rulers' words of support were rank hypocrisy. How could the US's union-busting president Ronald Reagan or Britain's strike-breaking prime minister Margaret Thatcher really be on the side of the Solidarity workers' union in Poland?

The people in the streets wanted to live in a society that was no longer characterised by hypocrisy and a huge gap between the rulers and the rest. How had the Eastern Bloc's seemingly intransigent rulers tumbled one after another in less than a year?

By the 1970s, the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc were in the throes of profound stagnation. The state capitalist regimes continued to hit the limits of capital accumulation set by their national economies. From the beginning of the 1980s, Reagan's renewed arms race placed an even more unbearable burden on the Soviet economy. Some of Eastern Europe's rulers—notably Poland and Hungary—had tried to overcome the limits of accumulation through loans and trade with the West. But this had made them more vulnerable to the gyrations of the world markets.

In 1984, as a recognition of the crisis, Mikhail Gorbachev was appointed Soviet party boss and embarked on "glasnost" (openness) and "perestroika" (reconstruction). But the bureaucracy's attempts at reform were too little, too late. And their inability to solve the crisis provoked further splits and unleashed forces at the base of society, which began openly questioning their rule.

Chris Harman argued in 1990, "The old people at the top raved about betrayal and even on occasions fantasised about telling their police to open fire. But key structures below them were already run by people who, at least privately, accepted the new multinational capitalist common sense."

What happened next, is the story of how the old ruling class fought to maintain its class power, despite the downfall of its party.

While the political setup changed, social relations between bosses and workers didn't. It was, as Cliff argued, a "sideways step". The transition saw Communist politicians become "democratic" politicians. The mangers of state-owned companies became the managers—and sometimes owners—of newly privatised companies. In some countries opposition movements and capitalist newcomers were part of the new setup.

But whether the new states were ruled by "reformed" Stalinist bureaucrats, liberal democrats or a combination of the two, the governments all accepted the logic of global capitalism. And, with some exceptions, they pursued vicious free market policies which involved rapid liberalisation of prices and trade and mass privatisation of state-owned companies.

This doesn't mean socialists should mourn the collapse of the Stalinist regimes. What's needed is that original spirit of socialist revolution and working class self-emancipation of 1917 that Stalinism buried.

Workers' self-emancipation

These arguments about Stalinism aren't academic or a reprise of left wing debates from the Cold War. The need for a socialist alternative to capitalism has never been more pressing.

Capitalist society—where everything is subordinated to the logic of capital accumulation—is driving us to disaster. Climate catastrophe, the threat of war and nuclear annihilation, the coronavirus crisis and global slump are all morbid symptoms of the system's multiple crises.

And questions about Stalinism cut right to the heart of what we're fighting for—what is socialism and how do we win it? As this pamphlet argues, Stalinist politics is the gravedigger of socialist revolution.

Instead, we need revolutionary socialist politics, which fight for a society that abolishes workers' exploitation and tears out the roots of women's and LGBT+ oppression and racism.

This genuine Marxist tradition insists that the "self-emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class", and that socialism is about working class people taking control of their lives and running society or it is nothing.

Notes

Thanks to to Joseph Choonara, Martin Empson, Christian Høgsbjerg, Charlie Kimber, Gareth Jenkins, Sheila McGregor and Tony Phillips for their comments on my *International Socialism* journal article, Stalinism's long shadow, which formed the basis for this pamphlet.

1 Correspondence—the Communist Party of Britain, the YCL and Stalin. https://communistpartyofgreatbritainhistory.wordpress.com/2021/10/18/

2 A term used to refer to Communist Party members after they supported Russian tanks going into Hungary and Czechoslovakia

3 Unity! September, 2021.

4 The French Communist Party began with nominal anti-imperialism when the FLN rose up in 1954, stating in its L'Humanité newspaper that France should accede to "the legitimate demands for liberty" of the Algerian people. Its position shifted to a "Popular Frontist" capitulation to the Fourth Republic's demands for unity.

5 The German revolutionary socialist Karl Liebknecht put forward the slogan, "The main enemy is at home," soon after the beginning of the First World War. At the time, the majority of Europe's socialist parties had capitulated and backed their own states in the war. He argued that socialists had to aim their fire at their own ruling class.

6 The figure calculated by Tony Cliff using Russian sources in AS Bubnov and others, 1931, The All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (Moscow-Leningrad), p113

7 Tony Cliff, State Capitalism in Russia, 1974, p121

8 Cliff, 1974, p119

9 These widely cited figures come from official documents of the NKVD secret police

10 Cliff, 1974, p13

11 Cliff, 1974, p13

12 Cliff, 1974 p.20

13 It's not possible to outline in any great detail the importance of the family within state capitalism in this pamphlet and the shift it represented from Russia in 1917. The arguments are contained in Sheila McGregor's article, Sexism, socialism and the state: women in the Eastern Bloc, published in the International Socialism journal

14 First, the Congress of Soviets wasn't formed on the day of the revolution—if it was, how could "dual power" have existed? Second, the term Marxism-Leninism was a later Stalinist invention that didn't exist at the time of the October Revolution.

15 For a thorough explanation of the process see Chris Harman's article, How the revolution was lost

16 Joseph Stalin, The Tasks of Business Executives, 1931

17 Pravda, 24 April 1970

18 Pravda, 24 April 1970

19 The figure of 38 million comes an analysis of official statistics in Jung Chang and Jon Halliday's Mao—the Unknown Story.

20 Charlie Hore, Spain 1936: Workers in the Saddle, 1990

21 Jerusalem Post, 2020

Further reading

History of the Russian Revolution by Leon Trotsky

In Defence of October by Leon Trotsky

From Lenin to Stalin by Victor Serge

Homage to Catalonia by George Orwell

State Capitalism in Russia by Tony Cliff

Class struggles in Eastern Europe by Chris Harman looks at how Russia imposed state capitalism on its satellites state after 1945—and the rich history of working class revolt against the Stalinist bureaucracy in those countries. Second hand copies are available from bookmarksbookshop.co.uk

Open Letter to the Party by Jacek Kuron and Karol Modzielewski. This pamphlet was written by two Polish socialists, who were part of working class resistance to the country's Stalinist regime, in 1968. They argued it was subject to the same dynamic as capitalism "accumulation for accumulation's sake".

Russia—How the Revolution was Lost, by Chris Harman. This pamphlet, available online, is brilliant explanation of how the Russian Revolution was defeated and turned into state capitalism. marxists.org/archive/harman/1967/xx/revlost.htm

Cuba, Castro and socialism by Peter Binns and Mike Gonzales. First published in 1983, this article goes through the dynamics of the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and explains why Cuba isn't a model of socialism. marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj2/1980/no2-008/binns-gonzalez.htm

Cuba Behind the Myths by Chris Harman looks at the Cuban regime after the fall of its main sponsor, Stalinist Russia. marxists.org/archive/harman/2006/xx/cuba.htm

A hidden history of the Cuban Revolution—how workers shaped the Guerrillas' victory by Steve Cushion is a brilliantly researched book looking at working class resistance during the Cuban Revolution.

The Prague Spring—Rebirth of Socialism from Below? by Tomáš Tengely-Evans. This article, marking the 50th anniversary the Prague Spring in Stalinist Czechoslovakia, has a useful explanation of the theory of bureaucratic state capitalism. isj.org.uk/the-prague-spring/

Sexism, socialism and the state—women in the Eastern Bloc,
by Sheila McGregor. This article takes on the popular argument that the Stalinist states made strides towards women's liberation.
isj.org.uk/eastern-bloc-women/

Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia—the Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent by Dan Healey

Mandate of Heaven—Marx and Mao in Modern China by Nigel Harris. Harris' classic explains why the Chinese Revolution of 1949 was a step forward, overthrowing landlordism and imperialism, but wasn't a socialist revolution.

Leon Trotsky on China are a collection of writings that show Trotsky's fight against Stalin's disastrous policy of subordinating the Chinese Communist Party to the nationalists in 1925-27.

Russia—Class and Power 1917-2000 by Mike Haynes

Russia Without Putin—Money, Power and the Myths of the New Cold War. Tony Woods' book provides a useful analysis of the regime in Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union,

While the Soviet Union collapsed more than 30 years ago, Stalinism continues to cast a long shadow on the left.

The need for a socialist alternative to capitalism has never been more pressing. Climate catastrophe, threats of war and nuclear annihilation, the coronavirus crisis and global slump are all morbid symptoms of the system's multiple crises.

Faced with such horrors, some young socialists are attracted to Stalinism's seemingly militant rejection of capitalism and imperialism.

In reality, Stalin was the gravedigger of Russia's socialist revolution of 1917—and revolutions across the world.

The Soviet Union, and states that adopted its state capitalist model, were class societies marked by exploitation and oppression.

In this pamphlet, Tomáš Tengely-Evans argues socialists shouldn't mourn the collapse of the Soviet Union or look to state capitalism regimes such as China.

What's needed is that original spirit of working class self-emancipation of 1917 that Stalinism buried.

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